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On the next visit to the doctor's office, patients may find physicians pushing more than just new medications.

They'll be handing out colored wristbands with a dose of education about their latest medical cause.

Otherwise used for declarations of faith and raising awareness for various illnesses, the new green wristbands draw attention to doctors leaving the state because of rising medical malpractice insurance costs.

Congressman Mark Kirk, a Highland Park Republican, launched Monday the "Keep Doctors in Illinois" wristband campaign, which first began in southern Illinois. He said the exodus of doctors, although more severely felt downstate, is hitting this area hard.

"The shortage of doctors is now affecting Chicago suburbs," Kirk said. "We're down to our last three neurosurgeons in Lake County."

It's not only neurosurgeons, but obstetricians, gynecologists and cardiologists. To escape high premiums, doctors are crossing the border into Wisconsin, Indiana and beyond, where they pay thousands less.

Brian Locker, an obstetrician at Advocate Lutheran General Hospital in Park Ridge, said the hospital lost 39 percent of its doctors practicing obstetrics in the past year.

"I had a patient last week who was on her fourth doctor this year, with the other three having given up obstetrics," Locker said. "Her first question to me was when was I going to stop

delivering babies?

"If this is not resolved very quickly and malpractice insurance keeps going up, basically all of us will just hang it up - either quit medicine or move from the area," he said.

On the flip side, a statement on the Illinois Trial Lawyers Association Web site contends bad business practices by insurance companies, not jury awards, drive up premiums.

Lake Forest cardiologist Jay Alexander, who is head of Kirk's medical advisory committee, said doctors will have to change the way they practice medicine and perhaps stop taking Medicare reimbursements.

He said the better option is to push for reform.

Wristbands are only part of the solution to win public support. Kirk is backing federal legislation for medical malpractice reform that calls for a \$250,000 cap on pain and suffering awards.

"What we are asking for is the same kind of legislative protection that is available in Wisconsin," Kirk said. "I think even a \$1 million cap is a drastic improvement from what we have now."

Presently, Illinois does not have a cap on awards.

"We are the poster child now for medical liability crisis for the nation," Kirk said.